

An Interview with Eric Samuelson



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1992 - 2012**

Coming to BYU as a Professor

I was hired at BYU in 1992, primarily to be a critical studies person. That was what they said to me. They also said that they liked my resume, that I had directing experience. They were hoping for somebody who could teach classes in theory, especially graduate level classes in theory. This was terrifying for me, because I was fresh from Graduate school and I was supposed to be teaching these classes. I just barely eked through to passing myself. And they wanted someone to teach theatre history.

One of the things that happens when you come in to interview is that they take you out to dinner. So we're sitting at dinner and somebody, I think it was Bob Nelson that was on the committee, said to me, "As you look through our class schedule, what classes do you note that are not offered that we ought to be offering?" First of all, it's a great question, and second of all, it presupposes that I'd actually looked through the catalogue for this place where I'm applying for a job. As it happens, just before dinner I thought to myself, "I wonder if they're going to ask me that. I probably ought to take a glance through the thing." What I hadn't remembered seeing in there were any classes in direct literature, which was one of the classes I had taught as a grad student at Indiana. I thought, I'm not 100% sure they don't offer that, but I'm just going to take a shot here and so I said, "Well, I can't help but notice the scarcity of offerings in dramatic literature." They sort of sat back and said, "You're right! We don't have any classes in dramatic literature, just basic survey of dramatic literature sorts of classes. We've assumed that the English Department would just do that. Do they?" I said, "No, I don't think they do." Which I had no idea, I was just making that up, I hadn't looked at their offerings.

So that was one of the first things they said: "We'd like you to create some classes in dramatic literature." Those eventually morphed into the classes that Megan Jones now teaches: Theatre and Media Arts 395 and 396. Which, when I offered them, they were just sort of that catch all 400R number that you used for anything you wanted to teach. Now it almost feels more like a theory class than dramatic literature. You read quite a few plays in there, but I think that actually reflects Megan's interests. That would probably not be the approach I would have taken, but I think it's a great class, and a beneficial one for the students. I'm the one that brought that course in and I honestly think that suggesting we offer a class like that may have been one of the reasons I got the job. Because at the time, when I came out for the interview, they said to me, "We're flying in three candidates and you rank third of the three." Which is not exactly what you want to hear; it's a disconcerting thing to hear.

I was in Indiana then and I was actually teaching at two places. I was teaching at Indiana University, but I also had a gig teaching at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio. Wright State desperately needed a theatre history teacher, so I applied for the job. So I taught Mondays and Wednesdays at Wright State in Dayton and slept on my brother's sofa, because my Brother lived in Dayton, and then I came back to Bloomington in Indiana and taught an undergraduate class on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I commuted every day. It was a four and a half hour drive from Bloomington to Dayton. I got to learn to drive it pretty well. In the evenings, I was working radio. I had a radio show in public radio for WFIU in Bloomington. So I was keeping busy. Then I got the gig, I got the job at BYU.

When I was an undergraduate, I worked with a theatre in Bloomington, called the Bloomington Playwrights Project. It was actually started by a friend of mine who was in the graduate program. I took all the playwriting classes they offered at Indiana, and they were, almost all of them, taught by Sam Smiley, who wrote the book *Playwriting: The Structure of Action*, which was a sort of standard textbook in playwriting. It was just all across the country. I was

taking playwriting classes from Sam, who I disagreed with strenuously, and still do, as far as how to teach playwriting. But he is a good man and a friend. It was a great way to get an education, to talk through it and say this is not working for me. I was having some plays produced there at the Bloomington Playwrights Project, so I was sort of active as a playwright. When I was hired at BYU, I said, "You know, I have this other secondary interest as well." They said, "Well, do that too." So I was directing all the time; I was directing at least once a year and sometimes twice a year. I was teaching all the graduate classes in theatre history and theory that the department offered. Then I was teaching theatre history and the dramatic literature classes, that I created. That was a heavy load. It was my normal load during those years, those six classes a semester, and they did expect me to be publishing. I did have some time to do that, mostly just by culling articles out of my dissertation. I had some publications out of that.

I did a piece on *Brand* (By Henrik Ibsen) in *Scandinavian Studies*. That was a nice credit, because *Scandinavian Studies* is a pretty prestigious journal. Then I got this idea for a play called *Accommodations*. It was a play about a family trying to make a decision as to what to do with an elderly relation who can't care for themselves any longer and yet was strongly and angrily resisting a nursing home. That seemed like a potent subject for drama, so I sort of wrote that in my copious spare time. I was on the season committee, and I passed it around to everyone there and they decided to do it and Tom Rogers directed it. That was kind of what launched me as a playwright here. So I was directing and writing plays and I was teaching.

Shift from Critical Studies to Playwriting

It happened in 1999: the shift in my job description, basically, from someone who taught theatre critical studies courses to somebody who taught playwriting. At that point, BYU had produced five of my plays: *Accommodations*, *Gadianton*, *The Way We're Wired*, *Three Women*, and one other. The Dramatic Structure and Analysis Course, I think, eventually became Theatre and Media Arts 114, which the Dean and I kind of created. It was supposed to be a class that explored the commonalities in the story structure between film and theatre. It lasted about 13 or 14 years. It had a nice little run. Students have to learn basic dramatic structure. They have to learn it. I think changing it was more a thing where the needs of the film program shifted and changed a little bit. I certainly didn't mind; I think the class served its purpose. But certainly collaborating with the Dean and creating that class was a wonderful thing. It was great fun. We took turns teaching that and it was really fun for me to sort of get into film a little bit and to show film clips.

There was actually a shift when Tim Slover decided to go over to the University of Utah. Tim Slover was the playwriting teacher. He taught playwriting. There was a need, because he got the gig in Salt Lake. Tim and I were very, very close friends. He had asked if I could kind of be his partner in WDA. That's kind of how I got into teaching playwriting, because I think WDA is a driven class. It's a really valuable class, especially when it comes to taking a play and beating it up and getting it to the point that it really starts to develop, to the point when it's good. For a couple of years, Tim's last years at BYU, he started to ask that I be sort of a co-teacher in there. It was pretty much always two teachers. In fact, it started off as two teachers. When it was PDA, before we decided to get rid of the PDA part, because of the other connotations of that word.

Really it came from Charles Whitman and Max Golightly, two of the great old men of the Theatre Department. Max and Charles both had an interest in playwriting and they shared the duties of teaching playwriting. As an undergraduate, I had taken the playwriting classes from both of them. They famously couldn't stand each other, which is sort of interesting. They went to an ATHA workshop and got this idea of creating a class like that at BYU. So they co-taught it. Tim

had inherited it, and he taught with Bob Nelson quite a bit. Then Bob didn't really want to do it anymore and when he became chair, he didn't feel that he would have the time to do it. So we needed a second person in there, and that became me. When Tim left, Bob said to me, "We think it's going to be easier for us to hire a critical studies person than it would be for us to hire a playwright. How about we shift you over to playwriting and just have you be the playwriting guy. You can still keep your hand in and still teach 114 and still teach whatever graduate classes you still have an interest in teaching, but your main responsibility will be Playwriting and that will be where we expect your publications to be." Then I'd be a supplementary instructor wherever they wanted to place me. I was excited about that. It was very congenial to me. I liked the idea of being more involved creatively.

I really do see myself as someone with a foot in both camps. I think if I'd gone for an MFA in playwriting, I would have neglected the critical studies sort of half of me, whereas going for the PhD meant that I could kind of do both. I don't have any regrets on that score. You can't get a PhD without really immersing yourself in the field. That's not possible. I found playwriting to be relaxing. Playwriting to me was the old friend that you could turn to when you had read enough Lacan and just couldn't face another paragraph of it. Then I would say to myself, "I'm going to treat myself and spend an hour working on a scene. I will find that refreshing when I go back to Lyotard or whatever." I think that's one of the reasons playwriting has always been very fresh for me. I've always sort of seen it as the old friend that you turn back to.

"Season of Eric" in Salt Lake City

Right now I'm in the middle of something that we're calling the "Season of Eric." The Play-B Theatre Company in Salt Lake is just a state treasure. It's a full equity house, a fully functional professional theatre company that is absolutely dedicated to nothing but new plays by local playwrights. It's the only one in the state, and there are a lot of states that don't even have that much. They have carefully and painstakingly built their own audience, to the point that I think they're on six straight years of sell outs. They sold every seat for every performance for six straight years. It's just a wonderful thing. Jerry Rapiere, who is the artistic director of the theatre up there, is the rare kind of director who also has tremendous dramaturgical gifts. He's really good at working with a playwright on new work and helping him grow and helping him develop. This year they decided they would devote the entire season to my plays. And why wouldn't they? I think it's a perfectly sensible thing for them to do. No, I mean, it's very, very flattering and a great, great honor, and I'm really enjoying it. As we're speaking today, three of the five plays have happened. So there's three down and two to go. So over the last four or five months, there's been a lot of pressure to make sure that not one but five scripts are production ready. That means a lot of the kind of rewriting that isn't as much fun. It's really persnickety, line by line, asking if the voice of the character is completely true in this particular line. That kind of stuff is tricky.

One of the things that Plan-B always does is radio play. Radio drama has its own challenges. One being: in playwriting you can create an entire world with design, right? The audience comes into the space and they immediately get clues and hints as to what the piece is about from the visual elements. All the way through. This is a wonderful thing about the collaborative nature of theatre as an art form. In Radio drama you don't have that, it's all oral. You have to kind of create the world and clue the audience into where we are and where we're situated and what's going on with nothing but sound. And it has to time out to the second. I would get frantic text messages from the director going, "We've got to cut ten seconds. Give me a line." I would have to go desperately through the script, which I thought I had cut to the bone, and find ten more seconds that can be excised. That's a fun challenge. It turns out we could have used that extra ten

seconds. The actor's adrenaline pushed it to the point where we ended up having about ten seconds we had to fill up at the end. You don't know that going in. So, that kind of playwriting is probably less fun.

TMA Department Collaboration Highlights

I always taught playwriting from a structuralist point of view. So I've always got that to fall back on now, I can always say, "Okay, what exactly are this character's objectives in this scene? What are his tactics in this scene?" It's a way to fix problems. But I think the biggest gift is just learning how to collaborate and learning the collaborative process. That's one thing that we always kind of highlighted at BYU. It was a collaborative process. As the director, you respected the art of the costume designer, you respected the art of the set designer, you respected the art of the lighting designer, and they were all part of the process. The director may have had final say over what would happen, but you were an artist among fellow artists. You were not a petty dictator telling everyone else what to do.

There are almost too many great collaborations to count, but there's one in particular that just sort of pops into my head. I was asked to direct Ludvig Holberg's play *Erasmus Montanus*. That was back in the day when we had a format that we followed for picking the season: we would try to select one Shakespeare and one play from each period, and over a five year period we would have captured most of the major periods of theatre history. Then our students would have, over the course of their time at BYU, a chance to see plays in a whole bunch of different styles and different time periods and so on. Well, 18th century European comedy came up, that's what it was. I had said, "Well, maybe we should do Holberg," and everybody in the season committee was saying, "Oh, that's a great idea," meaning "Who?" I'd always liked *Erasmus Montanus*, I'd always thought it was a fun play, but I hadn't re-read it for a while. So it gets on the season and I get assigned to direct it, and I get Jerry Argetsinger's translation of it and I read it and it's not funny. It's just not very funny. I mean, it's sort of funny, the basic story's funny, but it's got all kinds of jokes about the Danish linen industry that I'm sure just killed back then, those kinds of jokes. So what are we going to do with this? I was talking to Janet Swenson as my costume designer, and Janet and I had always had some very fundamental disagreements about costume design, because she came out of the world of professional theatre, meaning the Shakespeare Festival where she works all the time. According to that approach, the designer provided the costumes and the actors wore them and that's it. I came from a more experimental background in Indiana where the actors were expected to have some say in what they would wear and they would work collaboratively with the designer in finding the costumes. Janet and I, you have to understand that Janet is one of my dearest, lifelong friends, but we just disagreed on this point. When she got assigned to be the costume designer, she came to me in my office, and she said, "We're going to do it your way. And I don't like it. But we're going to do this your way." So I'm like, fine.

The first thing we had to do was come up with some way for this play to be funny. I got the idea that some of the things in the play might work better as almost like music videos, that some of the bits in the play might actually be funny. So for the audition notice, I thought, I want everyone to come and do a lip sync to some piece of popular music. The actors got very excited about that and it was honestly the most fun audition I've had in my life. We had these crazy things. And somebody, it may have been Athena Madan, showed up to the audition, and she'd taken a puppeteering class, and so she had a pet duck, a puppet duck. She did this duet with her pet duck, or puppet, and I was like, "What if I had puppet barnyard animals in the show?" So I cast her, and I cast three other people, and I said, you four are going to work together, and

you're going to create your own puppets and the puppet can be any kind of barnyard animal you want it to be, and then we'll figure out ways to use it in the show. They were excited about that.

A lot of them were actors that are the kind of actor you see a ton at BYU. When you're auditioning a show at BYU, you know you've got A actors, B Actors, C actors, D actors. If you're a young woman and you're an A minus, a really, really, capable talented actress, but just not quite as good as some of the other young women who are in the program, you're never going to get cast. If you're a guy, you can be a C and you can get cast in everything. What that means is that in part, a lot of the guys get kind of inflated ideas of their own talent and ability, and the girls tend to get very frustrated, understandably so. So this was a chance for me to use those girls. I could cast a lot of people and they could have a lot of fun and they could have a really good experience in the show. They wouldn't necessarily get a line, but they might get a gobble or a quack. Come to think of it, it's very much like, "What Does the Fox Say?" If I would have thought of it I would have realized that was a concept way back then. It was great fun.

Then Janet shows up to the first rehearsal after we cast it, and she had four costume racks with her with just a bunch of costumes and she said to the actors, go wild. Try stuff on. And we're just going to play. I was so grateful to her, because she didn't just sort of grudgingly say, "I want to work with Eric's ideas." She threw herself into it wholeheartedly, enthusiastically. That was one of the most fun, most enjoyable rehearsals I ever remember: just playing with the costumes and having fun with the costumes. She got her entire costume design out of that rehearsal. Then she said, "Now we're doing it my way." And I said, "Absolutely, we'll meet you half way on that." So we did *Erasmus Montanus* with musical interludes and a whole lot of lip syncs, and then basically any line in the play that wasn't funny we threw out and wrote a joke. The result was a crazy show. It was wild.

I think occasionally it may have had a little bit of Holberg going on, but really not. I hate the thought of doing, "Hey, we're going to do an 18th century play, and we're going to do it as a chore. We're going to do as if we're honoring an exhibit in a museum." A perfunctory thing and the audience comes and they're sort of dutifully edified because they saw a play or something. I thought, actually that doesn't honor the spirit of Holberg. Holberg was a popular entertainer. Holberg wrote jokes about the Danish Linen Industry because they were funny back then. People knew them and people yucked it up. So I think we honored the spirit of Holberg, without necessarily honoring all that much of the play. It was a crazy show, it got rave reviews, it sold out every performance. At one point, the duck and the sheep dragged LaVell Edwards, who was the football coach, up on the stage and he danced with them. I remember sister Bateman, President Bateman's wife, came to our performances, and she didn't care for it, and she ended kicking the duck, because it was pestering her. Which is also noteworthy and fun enough. Ary Farahnakian, Arynoosh Farahnakian, who was the son of Mary Farahnakian, our dear colleague, Ary played the lead, Erasmus Montanus. He's just honestly one of the funniest human beings on the planet. He's just one of those people that can make anything funny. He had a lip sync right before the intermission, where he did a lip sync to "All By Myself." He did it as a solo, but with the duck dancing and then doing ballet moves with the barnyard animals. I remember at one point where he did this lift with the sheep, which was just great. So the cast every night, those that weren't on stage, would race up to the lighting booth to watch Ary do "All By Myself," because it was such a funny bit. My wife and I took our Bishop Phillips, who was just recovering from a heart attack, and we got tickets and we took him to see the show. He laughed so hard, I honestly thought we were going to lose the man. He told us afterwards, he said, "That did my heart more good than anything else we could have done." I just remember that show as a particularly joyous and joyful collaboration between me and Janet, and then between me and the kids in the cast who just

threw themselves into this crazy conceit with such enthusiasm and energy and full out commitment. It was a very, very fun show.

Notorious Moment of Collaboration

Were there times where everything went wrong? Well, I suppose, one doesn't want to dwell, but I will for the sake of the annals of history. I felt it was my responsibility as the playwriting guy to try to get a new play on the season every year. I was really committed to that. I probably made myself somewhat obnoxious in Season Committee meetings, because I would say, "Here are the new scripts, read them, which one do you like the best, which one do you think we can do?" Then any season in which there was kind of a consensus that none of the new plays were really all that good, I would push for which ever one was least bad. Well, this one year, I actually thought it was quite good, was a play by a student playwright, Joel Bree, and was called *Houseboat Honeymoon*. At WDA, the reading went very well, and it was very well received. It was very funny, and the season committee agreed it was probably the best out of that particular batch, although there was sort of a mark of lack of enthusiasm about it. You can't ask for a nicer kid than Joel Bree. Really, really sweet kid. Great kid. Hard worker, very dedicated. So he came up with *Houseboat Honeymoon* and we put it in the Pardoe, where the stakes are always higher because it's a much bigger space, and I was assigned to direct it, and it just flopped. I mean, I don't know what else to say. It just wasn't very funny. It wasn't very funny in ways that a lot of our audience took offense at. We got a lot of negative letters about it.

We also got some positive response, I mean it wasn't a total disaster. Some people liked it quite a bit. It was funny, but it wasn't funny enough. It wasn't consistently laugh out loud funny from the beginning to the end. Which I actually thought it would be. I actually thought, coming out of WDA, we could get it to the point that it would be. I do not blame Joel for this at all, because I was the director. It was my responsibility to bring the play to life, and I didn't do it. I didn't pull it off. I can't complain about the setting design, it was a glorious setting design, it was a beautiful boat that we put there on stage. The lighting people were great to work with, there just isn't any sense in which the collaborative part of things went wrong. The costume designer was great to work with and I thought came up with lovely costumes. The actors were terrific, and a lot of them are still Facebook friends, we stay in touch and I'm still involved with their lives from that standpoint at least. Haley (Flanders) is back doing her MA. She was lovely in that play. It just didn't work very well. Despite all the best collaborative efforts, it just didn't float. What's the William Goldman line about Hollywood? That, "Nobody knows anything." With all the best intentions in the world, everybody working really hard, everybody doing the best job we possibly could, it just sort of laid there. It didn't come to life. Honestly who should be blamed for that, I should be as the director. I take full responsibility for it. I just didn't do a good job of directing that play. It's perfectly okay for it to have not gone well. You don't want those, but it does happen from time to time, because it's an art form. That's the thing about the arts. Sometimes it just doesn't come together and you can't necessarily pinpoint exactly what went wrong. When you think of Hollywood, you think of really big, really expensive films that get made, and then just don't do any business and just die, and they're just terrible films. That happens at least every decade, and you look back at the elements that went into that film, and you think to yourself, it had fine actors, etc, you know. There's no particular reason why that one didn't work and the other ones did. But you have to acknowledge that that is what happened. That's really what happened. It looked great on paper. I don't regret picking that play, I don't regret agreeing to direct it, but I regret very much that Joel's vision wasn't realized. And I think that's left on me.

First Mask Club Performance

I don't want this to come across as sacrilegious, but there is an element of it in this. There was a director who wrote his own script and then decided to direct it for Mask Club. It was sort of short vignettes from LDS Church history kind of strung together. It was 28 minutes long, and it had something like 22 scenes. So every one of the scenes was very short and each was its own isolated moment, all from early church history. All about Joseph Smith, culminating finally in Joseph Smith's martyrdom. So the director cast a whole lot of actors; there were a bunch of us in this thing. I was a freshman at BYU. My first day as a freshman at BYU, I had a job washing windows at Helaman halls, and I stepped back to admire my work and fell off the third story ledge. It didn't just sort of break the bone, it basically shattered my left arm. So I had this huge, very cumbersome cast on, but intrepid lad that I was, I thought, "I'm going to be an actor, I'm going to try out for things." Of course, I didn't even get called back to anything, cause who's going to cast a guy with a cast on his arm, but then I got cast in this Mask Club, and I was very excited, but because I had this big ugly cast, I had the fewest lines and the fewest numbers of scenes of anybody in the show.

This particular director, apparently nobody had told him that it's possible to suggest a new scene by using a blackout. You know, you can do that with lighting. No, he thought you had to open and close the front drape in between each of the 22 scenes in 28 minutes. So that curtain is going voop, voop, voop. Because I was the guy that was off stage most often, I had to close the curtain mostly, but I only had one arm to do it with. So I'm yanking on this rope, which means the curtain didn't just open and close smoothly, it jerked open and closed over and over and over and over again. So it was, "This is my Beloved Son," ree ree ree ree ree, "Emma, what are we to do with these plates?" Oh my goodness. It was meant as exactly the opposite of sacrilege, it was supposed to be veneration and worship and it was supposed to be this very spiritual experience. But with the combination of the spiritual subject matter and then this inept curtain, it got to the point that every time the curtain twitched, the audience—it wasn't that they laughed, it was that you could see they were in physical pain trying not to laugh. You could hear that kind of muffled not laughing. It was horrible. The acting and the writing were all on par with the curtain. It was all dreadful.

I was sold on blackouts. I'm all about blackouts. I don't think I've ever directed a show where I've even used the front drape. I used it all up that one day. It was in the Nelke with that kind of bulky front drape anyway. Back then, some faculty member, I think randomly assigned, was supposed to respond to the Mask club. They'd get up and they'd offer a brief critique of it and then they'd lead a discussion. So Charles Metten, who was still the department chair at the time, gets up and he says to the director—this is the first thing out of his mouth—he said, "This is your Mask Club, which means you can't get into the class unless you're a major in this field." The kid sort of nods and he says, "You and I are going to go directly now to the Advisement Center and we're going to change your major." And that's really mean. That poor kid. I remember the director, he was a really nice kid. The laughter stopped at that point. Everyone was just sort of horrified. It was a very sobering thing for him to say. Then Metten says, "And who was the idiot on the curtain?" So I raise my broken arm. I was the idiot on the curtain. He sort of stared at that arm and he stared at me and he stared at the arm then he goes, "Bless you son. That curtain had more character than anybody else on stage."

Now, I know that we have all experienced dreadful Mask Clubs in our day, but I defy anyone to come up with a worse one than that. I was the only compliment, and it was completely unearned. Obviously, somebody ought to have told this kid, just use a blackout. Probably

somebody ought to have told him that 22 vignettes from church history in 28 minutes is probably not a very good play. They ought to have done that. Pick a few, tell a story, and develop some of the characters. As I understand it, the kid did in fact change his major and ended up as a seminary teacher. I'm sure he's perfectly inspirational seminary teacher for his students. I have no doubt. He probably tells that story, they would love that story. He probably tells it on himself in a self-deprecating kind of way, because he was such a nice guy. I don't doubt that he's done a great deal of good in the world.

I find myself a little bit sort of knee jerk resistant to calling it performance art. Performance art is a different thing and fine as far as it goes, but I think I'm doing theatre. I think to some extent I have a little bit of an old fashioned view of it. It's a script. We're doing a script. We may collaborate together in the creation of that text, we may start the project without a script, but we are doing a production of a script and we are actors and we are playing roles. I mean, I don't think I was hostile to experimentation. I just want to preserve this. I could be more old-fashioned, because my father's an opera singer. I get these odd phone calls from my father from time to time. It's very interesting, because he'll say, "Have you seen the latest from the Met?" Because they've got this thing now where you can see performances from the Met in a movie theatre and stuff like that, and of course he loves that. He sees everything. And I don't. I've seen a couple of them, but I don't make it every time. So I'll say no and he'll say, "Well, it was terrible. It was terrible." And I'll say, okay and then he'll say, "It's exactly the kind of thing you'd like." I think to myself, we're having an argument over something I haven't seen, because you think if I did see it, I'd like it, and I oughtn't to. Sadly, he's probably right. Because he'll say, "They did *La Traviata*, and they set it in the 1950s or something," and I'm like, "Great! That sounds really cool! I'd love to see what they did with it!" As far as he's concerned, there's a right way to do opera, and lots and lots and lots of wrong ways to do opera.

Students at BYU

What I'm most proud of are the kids, the students that have left from here and gone on and made something remarkable of their lives. I can recall dozens, even hundreds of students who touched my life and who are kind enough to say that I might have touched theirs in some ways. I just heard from one, a wonderful young man, I gave him his first part as an actor. He left BYU, went on to law school, and he was saying that he just got named a state judge. He thought that I gave him his start by casting him in a show at BYU as a freshman. I don't know about that, but it doesn't really matter to me.

It was super fun to watch that Brad Pitt Zombie Movie, *World War Z*, because Mireille Enos was a favorite student of mine when she was at BYU. I'm proud of the fact that I'm the first faculty member at BYU to ever cast her in a main stage show. I cast her in the very first show I ever directed at BYU, where we took all the plays describing the passions sequence from the Wakefield cycle and we turned them into a play called *The Wakefield Passion Play*. She was in that, and was a tremendous, tremendous actress as an 18 year old freshman. Just astonishing as a freshman, and you thought, this young woman is really going to go somewhere, and she has. It was super fun to watch *World War Z* and she gets to kick a zombie. She gets to kick a zombie in the face. She gets to kiss Brad Pitt. She gets to do all these really cool things, which have to be great fun for her. She was one of the unusual ones, she was more driven than most kids, and she was probably more talented than most kids. That combination of drive and talent has led to a very strong career in the theatre as a multiple Tony Award nominated actress, and now moving into film, and she's got her TV series, *The Killing*.

I've got a lot of other kids who are out of the field and they're in law school or they've graduated from law school, or they're in business or doing this or that and the other, and I think that's just wonderful. Theatre can be a spring board to doing lots of different things. It teaches confidence, it teaches organizational skills, it teaches life, basic life lessons. So I am as proud of all the kids that I've ever gotten to teach as I am of our stars. When on Facebook or email or whatever, kids reconnect, that's just a wonderful thing and great fun.

So that's it. After a while, you don't remember that one class you taught particularly well or something, you know. That sort of thing sort of fades, but you remember the kids. That's the thing that I remember the most. And then the friendships that you form, not just with the students, but also with colleagues. You make lifelong friends in this field.

I mean, the thing was, we had disagreements among faculty. That always happens, right? You would hope so, I don't think you could progress if you didn't. Different ideas. But what we were always trying to do, and I really do think this is true, I really do think all of us were always committed to the same thing, which was to bless the lives of the students. I mean that's really what we were trying to accomplish.

I think to some extent, to the very, very limited extent that these words mean anything, I suppose I was probably at the liberal end of the continuum among the faculty theologically, but I also felt very much like people in the, what you might call the more conservative wing, were people I cherished.

Reflections on Career

Well, I wish I'd written a book. I've had notes towards one for a long time. I just never put it together. I just didn't put the time in to get it finished. I'm very interested in naturalism. I'm very interested in Zola and that whole period, and it seems to me what's going on right now in both theatre and film is what you might call neo naturalism or a new approach to naturalism. I especially see it in independent film making. Films that just say, "We're going to take these characters, we're going to put them in this situation, we're just going to see what plays out." The characters are sort of not morally defined as they would be in a melodrama, which involves morally polarized characters, villains and heroes. One great example is that film called *Open Water*. It's about two people, husband and wife, and they're stuck out in the middle of the ocean and the boat that was supposed to pick them up hasn't. It's forgotten them. There are sharks, but it's not like *Jaws*. It's not structured like an action movie, like a melodrama, the way *Jaws* is. It's just what happens to these two people. At times they act admirably towards each other, and at times they act horrifically towards each other, and at times they completely lose it, and at times they act with a kind of strange nobility of character.

It's like reality TV, but it is scripted. The whole point is to not insert the director into the process, particularly. Obviously the director is making every choice, and he is inserted into it, but it's to create the illusion that he's not. Zola said, "We're going to turn the audience into amateur sociologists," We're all going to sit there and analyze the social circumstances and the cultural circumstances that have led the character to become who she is and thereby we can change the world and we can change society in this provoked experiment. There's a kind of determinism to that, that I don't think anybody ever believed in. Certainly no one believes it today. Artistically, it's fascinating. Artistically, not pretending that we're doing some sort of sociological experiment, or even that that's possible, but saying instead what we're going to do is just show this person, this character, this group of people, this circumstance.

I think for example of the Duplass Brothers, Jay and Mark Duplass. They've made several films that are really within this whole vein. There are a number of other filmmakers that are

working in this area. I just think it's fascinating, both in theatre and film, because there are a lot of playwrights that are doing this as well. Then there's sort of a subset of it, which is the sort of thing that Neil LaBute does. What Neil does instead is he takes it moralistically, and I mean that advisedly. I don't mean morally, I mean moralistically. He judges his characters. He creates villains. He creates people who are utterly completely despicable, like the Aaron Eckhart character in *In the Company of Men*. What Neil is challenging us to do is he's saying, "I'm going to create the most awful human being on earth, and just lay him out there, and there's not going to be any kind of a poetic justice, he's not going to get caught at the end, he's just there." So the audience watches this guy and we think, I'm not that bad, but am I anything like that? And if I am, I need to change. So Neil's work, which I think is badly misunderstood a lot of the time, presupposes a morally centered audience. It presupposes an audience sophisticated enough to get what's going on. The danger, of course, that somebody will see *In the Company of Men* and go "Haha that'd be fun, let's do that," or something along those lines, would be dreadful. Or conversely, just go "You're an awful person and you made this awful film and how awful of you." Why would you want to put those points of view on the stage? Aaron Eckhart says that when he was at Sundance in *In the Company of Men*, people would come up to him and they would say, "I hate you." And he would say, "No, no, you hate the character I was playing in this film." And they'd say, "No, no, I hate you for playing him. For agreeing to it. You chose to be in this, I hate you for making that decision."

I still watch a lot of these kinds of films. I tend to track films that have been given the label Mumblecore. The Mumblecore films, they talk about it as hyper realism or hyper naturalism, and it seems to be a very fascinating movement. It's clearly coming out of Zola, while rejecting the positivist ideology that Zola represents. Which we ought to discard, that's fine, but that doesn't mean that they aren't awfully interesting plays, like *Miss Julie*. I think that's where a lot of wanting to write this book came from, was from my interest in Strindberg. Because this is certainly one of the main threads of Strindberg. The Strindberg that wrote *Miss Julie* and *The Father* and *Dance of Death* and those hyper naturalistic plays in which the characters are complicated. Who's the hero of *Miss Julie*? Who's the morally centered character of *Miss Julie*? None of them are. But it's a tremendously powerful tragedy. It's a tremendous play, it's a brilliant play, just because it's so human.

I just thought it'd be interesting to trace it. It seems to me to be a movement, it feels to me like Esslin in *The Theatre of the Absurd*, because what does Esslin do? He writes *The Theatre of the Absurd*, and immediately all the playwrights go, "We're not that. I'm not an absurdist, what are you talking about." What he finds are commonalities in the works of a lot of really interesting playwrights, and he creates a book which in turn becomes definitive. It does map out the field. Yeah, it's got historiographical problems, we all recognize that, but that doesn't negate its impact. You have to contend with it.

I'm thinking of this director, one of the most interesting directors I know, a Southern Director, Jeff Nichols. He did this new film with Matthew McConaughey, *Mud*. *Mud* is not really that naturalistic. *Mud* actually gets into the mythic dimensions and ties into Huck Finn in really weird and interesting ways, and it's a love story. It's not really defined by the theory I'm working with, the way his earlier works were, but I don't care, it's a great film, I really like it. So he's evolving from this and that's interesting too. *Beast of the Southern Wild* is another really interesting terrific film, and *Hunger*. Now I haven't yet seen *7 Years a Slave*, but it's going to be nominated for an Oscar and then it will come to Provo.

But again, what does naturalism mean? One thing it could mean is *Chariot's* Terrence Malick and just his fascination for nature. Which is absolutely a part of Strindberg and part of

Zola. He'll spend just forever on a bug crawling across a leaf or whatever. He'll just hold on a shot for a long time. You really see that in *The New World*, for example.

That's interesting too, just to look for moments of this neo naturalistic style in otherwise quite Hollywood, agenda oriented movies. I saw *Captain Phillips*, for example, which is honestly kind of a troubling film in a lot of ways. This is what happens when a third world country runs into the might of the American Military. It's very easy to read as imperialistic, which I don't think actually it's intended to be. I think that director's too savvy for that. I think that the film spent so much time building your sympathy for the Somali. But what's the last moment of the film? Tom Hanks is rescued. He's been saved, and yet he's in shock and there's that long sequence dealing with that medic on the ship where he can't describe to her where it hurts. It's the least triumphalist ending you can imagine to a film that really could be quite triumphalist. I'm just thinking about it.

AMC, over the weekend showed John Wayne's *The Cowboys*, dreadful film. But the scene, the fight scene between Bruce Dern and John Wayne is the most brutal thing I've ever seen, because it doesn't look terribly choreographed. It actually looks like they just let these two guys wail on each other. They're both a little bit awkward at it, and so the punches look like they really land and hurt, and of course I doubt that was true, this is a John Wayne film, they're going to protect him, but whoever did the fight choreography for that was just brutal. Then at the end of the film there are these child cowboys that John Wayne has gotten, because he can't get grown men to work for him. He's got this group of twelve to fourteen year olds that are driving the cattle across the range and Bruce Dern's the head of this group of rustlers and rustling him. Bruce Dern kills John Wayne, so these 13 and 14 year old boys get their revenge by shooting all the cattle rustlers. Wow, is that distressing. What happens is they're shooting them and the music is this jolly kind of "Yay us!" kind of music, it's the most awful thing. These 13 year olds are shooting grown men in the head and the music is like "Yay!" It's so weird. It's sort of unwatchable today.

How does theatre change the world?

The impact of theatre relies on the people that see the show, but, of course, everybody has a different completely subjective reaction for anything that they see. We've all had the experience of seeing a play and coming out afterwards deeply moved and feeling like something has changed in how we view the world. We've all had that experience, I think. That love is art form. You come out of the theatre and you just feel like life is not actually ever going to be the same, because of this experience. And the person next to you meanwhile is bored out of his mind, or offended or angry. I think it's able to happen on a personal level, because it's a human interaction. It's a human synergy. We're not seeing celluloid images projected onto a screen, we're seeing a human being up there in all his humanity and all his vulnerability. Opening himself up for us.

I think it's very likely that there is less of an impact of theatre now. I mean, I remember reading Arthur Miller's Memoir about the opening night of *Death of a Salesman*, and he talks about how no one applauded for minutes, and then it was just screaming and grown men were hugging each other. All these businessmen that had been dragged to the theater by their wives are weeping, and I mean it changed people, in part because that play spoke so powerfully to a certain generation and to a certain class within our society. I think that the Brian Dennehy revival of it is on Broadway right now, and there may be people in the audience on who it has the same impact, but I don't think very many, and I don't think it's likely. You look at New York, you look and see there's Rodgers and Hammerstein, and they do South Pacific, and we look at South Pacific today as immensely dated. What they were saying with that was "Your kid's going to come home from the Pacific Theater in WWII, and he may very well have an Asian bride, and how are

you going to handle that?” There was an immediacy to the concerns of that particular script. The songs they’ve got to be carefully taught had a power and impact on that generation that it simply can’t have anymore. We’ve changed.

I mean, what’s playing on Broadway right now? *Shrek the Musical*, *Elf the Musical*. We’re taking disposable bits of popular culture and we’re recycling them. The late capitalistic post modernism. I worry about that a lot, because a lot of things I’m doing right now in the “Season of Eric” are somewhat political in their intent and impact. Well are we just preaching to the audience? Because who comes to see, who comes to that house? It’s local.

Beginnings in Theatre

Angels in America. Almost more than anything else is *Angels in America* playing in New York, but even earlier than that. Earlier than that was when I was in High School, and our high school theatre director did a play that she had written which she had adapted from Mark Twain’s *The War Prayer*. We were in the middle of Vietnam. I was a sophomore in High School and Vietnam was still going. The conversation you had with your friends was, “Do you burn your draft card and move to Canada? Or do you volunteer for a branch of the service where you’re not going to be crawling through a jungle.” But the war ended before my draft number came out; I got lucky. But that hadn’t happened yet, we did *War Prayer*, and it was about war, it was about Vietnam. I mean, it was about the fears that we all had, the terrors that we all had. I’m sure that if I reread the script today I would see that it was amateurish and I know our high school production was very amateurish, but there was nobody in the audience that felt that. It has a tremendous powerful impact. Then she went on to do it in the theatre in town, with more professional actors, and me and my friends all went and spent the entire time scoffing and saying, “We were better.” Which we surely weren’t.

The Impact of Theatre and Film

I think that’s exactly right. And that’s why Plan B Theatre Company is so remarkable, because it is all about local playwrights, local concerns, and things that we’re interested in, things that we care about, our lives. I saw that with my play *Borderlands*, in Salt Lake, because when Plan B did *Borderlands*, the response to it was pretty remarkable. The Theatre got about thirty emails from people and they shared it with me, and it was people saying, “I went and saw this play and I called my sister who I haven’t spoken to in 15 years and we reconciled.” Kurt Bateman, who had played Dave, the lead character of the play, had not spoken to his father since he came out as gay. That had been 15 or 20 years, and his father came to see the play, and I saw the two of them embracing and now they’re a father and son again. They see each other still. I think it still can happen, it still does happen, but it does require commitment to doing new work. It really does. That’s the lifeblood of theatre. Again I go back to the Golden Age of American Theater where what happened on Broadway mattered. What happened in New York mattered, because it spoke to larger concerns. *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs* spoke to a kind of family situation that was falling apart or perceived to be falling apart and therefore had an impact and a power beyond just that finished presentation in New York. It spoke to those audiences. So we do *Oklahoma*, and a tremendous director does a really insightful, bright, smart really well executed production of that show, and it had some power, it packed a punch that was nice to see.

I’ll tell you another one: Mel Larson with *Little Happy Secrets*. That’s a play that speaks to people. It’s a courageous play, an important and powerful play, and it has some legs to it. It should, but I also know how hard that was for Mel to write.

We can all talk about *Schindler's List*, because we've all seen the film. But we can also talk about how: isn't there sort of a flattening of experience that happens when we all share the same pop culture icons, we all share the same pop culture references?

I mean, there's this film coming out now which I'm absolutely going to see, and I expect to enjoy thoroughly, this new one with Tom Hanks as Walt Disney and Emma Thompson, *Saving Mr. Banks*. It fits all these conventional memes, the big hearted generous American, the tightly wound uptight British woman, the artist fighting for her vision, the showman wanting to share that vision in a palatable way to everybody. It's got all those conventional memes. I'm sure they'll all play out delightfully, right? But really, what is that about except the ubiquity of Disney? The victory of Disney. The disneyfication of popular culture and the triumphant way of which it's commodified, what we used to call art. And that's okay. I understand we all have to make a buck. It looks terrific, it looks like great fun. I'm planning to see it. I expect to enjoy it. But there's the nagging little part of my mind that's also troubled by it, you know? I think we all have that as well.

To take it back to naturalism, I see this new naturalism as an anti-Hollywood movement. I see it as a movement of people saying well we're not going to do that. Whatever we do, we're not going to structure those narratives that way. We're going to find a different way to, a different set of stories we're going to tell, because we want to tell stories that to us - feel truer.

Theatre Is...

Part of what's magnificent about theatre as an art form is that it's ephemeral. It vanishes as soon as it appears. Somebody said one time that: The great thing about film is that it's the same every time you see it, and the bad thing about film is that it's the same every time you see it. I'm absolutely not knocking film, because I love, love, love, love film. That's a lot of what I do now as I blog; I see a lot of movies and I blog about them. But there is something kind of wonderful about an art form that vanishes as soon as it appears, the ephemerality and the live-ness of it. The fact that you're dealing with real human beings that are up there performing for you. That they're up there with all their human foibles and all their human weaknesses and also all their human greatness. Creating and telling a story and creating this artificial construct of life, which we call a dramatic character. That act of creation then, the audience becomes implicit in it, involved with it. The audience shares in that creation. So you're sitting in a chair, you know, as we're talking. Well, what is that chair? That chair can be a chair or it can be the captain's seat in the starship Enterprise. Or it can be a king's throne. Or it can be a chair in a diner where two lonely people meet. I mean, the chair is anything we say it is. It has whatever characteristics. Nor does it need to be a chair. It has whatever characteristics with which we choose to endow it. We share with the audience in that process of endowing it. And so when you go back and you think about shows you've directed, or shows you've written, you remember details about the shows, but you're also aware that the show itself is gone. It's forever gone. That's kind of lovely, but it's also a little bit horrifying. It can make you feel like you wasted your life, but I wouldn't have liked to waste my life any other way.